Slavery in New England

By

Matthew Lincoln

Slavery was an integral part of civilization stretching as far back in history as Sumeria. Through the centuries slavery meant different things to different cultures, peoples, and nations. In some societies, it was a way to gain citizenship while in others it was a death sentence. It is with this background that New England came to inherit this long-lasting institution. It is through this understanding that one must look to see the importance of slavery to the fledgling New England colony and its lingering within its borders.

It should be noted that slavery existed throughout the "English Atlantic world." Nor was it merely Europeans invading Africa to capture Africans alone. It is well known that "African elites" bought and sold other Africans as well as "Islamic traders." These Mohammedan [2-3] slave-dealers had "exported millions of enslaved Africans to Europe and Asia" by the time New England ventured into the world of forced human labor. The English akin to many other nations held no taboo in "slave-owning"[4]

One of the main reasons that slavery was barely thought to be wrong did not lay on historical records alone. The center of people of early New England was the Church, the center of the Church was the Bible. The Bible itself makes it clear that owning slaves is legitimate.

[1] Warren,W. (2016), *New England Bound.* New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.26[2]Ibid. 27
[3]Ibid. 27
[4]Ibid. 27

Many passages from Deuteronomy and Leviticus were used to justify the ownership of other [5] human beings. Some of the colonies even wrote slavery into their laws to sanction slavery as long as the slaves "were Foreign." or were the spoils of war. In this context slavery slowly became [6] ingrained in New England as it had in other parts of the world.

Of how slavery became intertwined with New England was through its dealings with the West Indies. New Englanders wanted sugar, tobacco, as well as other commodities that were provided by their Caribbean kin. At the same time, those in the West Indies wanted food such as "mundane crops", "beef, pork" as well as "fish" that were used to not only feed the plantation [7-8] owners and their families but also the slaves that worked on these plantations. This scheme aided both New England and the West Indies to prosper and "turn a substantial prophet" due to the [9] ongoing relationships that they had with one another. Without New England's ability to provide the West Indies with foodstuff the West Indies might not have been able to produce as many products as they were able. New England was essential to the success of the West Indies.

Another way that slavery became entwined with New England's life was the use of slaves to do laborious and mundane choirs. It was slaves that would "clear the forests" so that the colonists could live in ever-growing communities. Slaves also had to make "turpentine" as well as "tar" that would be "used in shipbuilding". Slaves were also in charge of the "feeding, cleaning, and clothing of people" as well as "maintenance of property." Whenever more water was needed it would be a slave that would fetch it. Slaves were often the ones that would feed

[5] Other books in the Bible that sanction slavery are Genesis, Joshua, Exodus, Corinthians, and Ephesians to name a few.
[6] Warren,W. (2016), *New England Bound.* New York: Liveright Publishing Corporations.33
[7] Ibid. 58
[8] Ibid. 55
[9] Ibid. 58

the livestock, make the meals and mend the clothing. Anything that the Colonists did not want to do they would assign it to a slave. In some cases, slaves would be in charge of a warehouse where goods were stored. This proximity allowed slaves to learn a great deal about the lives of their masters. Many slaves in New England shared meals with the families they served and many of the masters seemed to have taken an interest in the lives of those that served them. Some masters even found it necessary to have their slaves learn to read. Some masters would free their slaves upon their death while others would will them to their next of kin. By allowing the slaves to many of the aforementioned chores they became valuable. This increased the wealth of those that had slaves simply by owning them. In many parts of New England slaves were more of a status symbol than a need.

As stated before the proximity of slaves to their masters allowed slaves to learn about their master's joys and fears. In some instances, slaves would act out either by suicide or by burning a house down. In both cases, the master would lose property. Some slaves would learn what they could about the laws of the colonists and use those laws against their masters in court. In some cases, the slaves won the battles they put forth especially if it was sexual. Just as the slaves were learning about their masters some within the colony began to see slaves as humans with rights as any other person. Though slavery would continue it appears that over time the institution of slavery in New England became less and less a reality or a need. Since slavery was not integral to the New England lifestyle it was easier for some New Englanders to see its futileness. Had New England been a plantation-based society the story may have been different. It is also understood that without slavery New England wouldn’t have gained wealth from the Caribbean nor would it have many of its educational institutions because the labor would most

likely not have been possible without the reality of slavery.

The abandonment of slavery before the rest of the States would allow New Englanders to place its existence in the back of their minds. It would be this forgetfulness that New Englanders would take a moral stance against the south that continued to have slavery. This forgetfulness would become pushed so deep into the subconscious that many would forget that it ever happened at all.